

THE GULL

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY // VOL. 105 NO. 1 WINTER 2021



BIRDERS ENTER THE ELECTORAL ARENA

BY ILANA DEBARE

Several Golden Gate Audubon Society members led birders from around the country into a new kind of field work this fall—political field work of get-out-the-vote organizing. Auk The Vote, a new all-volunteer initiative, mobilized over 100 birders to do phone-banking on behalf of pro-environment candidates during the fall 2020 campaign season.

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American Kestrel, one of the birds
impacted by climate change.
Corey Raffel



Sandhill Cranes.

HABITAT, OR THE ART OF BIRDING DURING A PANDEMIC

BY PAM YOUNG, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

In the midst of our beautiful Bay winter wonderland, the pandemic seized our popular holiday birding celebrations from our collective grasp. After cancelling our most anticipated events, such as our Christmas Bird Counts, what are we doing instead? How are we coping?

Birders are a sensible and compliant lot. We maintain our social distance, wear our masks, travel separately, and keep our own gear. Our resourceful reports and spectacular photos of vagrants, hybrids, and exciting discoveries—such as a rare Log-

gerhead Shrike, furtive Plumbeous Vireo, and camouflaged American Bittern—are welcome bright spots in a dangerous time. We are a robust and vibrant online birding community.

Our extraordinary estuary hosts throngs of loafing Godwits, Stilts, Avocets, Willets, and well over 300 species. Upland, our wintering Hermit Thrushes, Fox, Golden-crowned, and White-crowned Sparrows, and their mixed species flock companions suffered daunting migration threats. California's fires engulfed four million acres

that threatened every returning migrant. Extraordinary pluck and instinct guided each bird through endless expanses of scorched earth—a miraculous testimony to avian adaptation.

But a lingering question looms large. Will there be less habitat for birds and other wildlife?

Our GGAS supporters are habitat action heroes, attending virtual hearings and speaking up for living shorelines, preserving grassland, or donning boots and restoring habitat. We advance a growing movement to build bird-friendly cities and convert our parks and back yards to native plant sanctuaries. Functioning habitats foster high biodiversity, are resilient to sea level rise, sequester carbon, and are an enduring remedy to the climate crisis. We work hard to tell our important story: Birds are critical to our personal well-being.

The pandemic is a challenge like no other and GGAS critically depends on your support. Please help GGAS continue our work as conservation advocates and as mentors to our young future environmental stewards. Thank you for enjoying our online features, such as our popular Speaker Series, our thoughtful and entertaining blogs, and our many online classes. One happy online student sang high praises: “We looked forward to this class every week and found it an enriching activity—especially in these times of Covid-19. Thank you for your dedication and to the Golden Gate Audubon Society.” Your donations keep our voice strong. Like our feathered migrants, we’ll persist with pluck and instinct and with your loyal partnership.

NEWS BRIEF

Call for Blogs

We want to hear from you! Do you have a stay-at-home birding essay you’d like to share? Seen any interesting birds lately? Let’s stay connected online. Our Golden Gate Birder Blog offers an opportunity for publication and outreach. Email your essays to Melissa at mramos@goldengateaudubon.org.

Project Feeder Watch

In lieu of our cancelled Christmas Bird Count events this year, we recommend you check out feederwatch.org and learn how to create and contribute your report about birds that you see at your feeder. Your reports will be part of a valuable reservoir of data for conservation projects!

Clay Anderson Is a Local Hero

GGAS Eco-Education Manager Clay Anderson has won Bay Nature Magazine’s 2021 Local Hero Award and was named Environmental Educator of the Year. Please pencil in April 11 at 5:00 pm and April 13 at 4:00 pm for virtual celebrations. More info at <https://baynature.org/local-hero-awards>.

Winter 2021 Classes

Registration is now open for several of our winter 2021 classes. We’ll have lots more birding classes to offer beginning February and March. Be sure to check out our adult education page to learn more, get updates, and register today. <https://goldengateaudubon.org/education/classes>.

BIRDERS ENTER ELECTORAL ARENA from page 1

Although unaffiliated with Golden Gate Audubon, Auk was the brainchild of GGAS members David Robinson and Laura Cremin. (I also helped with social media and press outreach.) Robinson and Cremin met through GGAS's East Bay Conservation Committee, which Cremin chairs.

"I'd been looking for the right fit for working on climate change and conservation," said Robinson, a passionate birder and longtime gay rights activist. "When 2020 came, I felt the election was the most important thing we could do to address those issues."

Talking last spring after an EBCC meeting, Robinson and Cremin realized that election work was a noticeable gap in the birding world. While National Audubon Society and other birding groups are active on conservation issues, they have traditionally avoided endorsing and supporting candidates. Auk The Vote was created to fill that gap. Determined not to reinvent the wheel, Auk partnered with groups such as Flip The West and Environmental Voter Project that already were operating phone banks to swing states. Volunteer Kristen Schwarz created a website that listed dozens of phone-calling opportunities each week, with sessions ranging from Phone Banking for Introverts to Spanish-language phone banking.

Auk also organized five phone-banking sessions specifically geared to birders, each with a guest appearance by a "celebrity" birder—writers Jennifer Ackerman, Jenny



David Robinson and Laura Cremin.

David Robinson felt the election was the most important thing we could do to address climate change and conservation

Odell, Jonathan Franzen, Nate Swick, and Caleb Crain, plus New York Audubon board member Chris Cooper, the Black "Central Park birder" who was threatened with arrest by a white woman last spring after asking her to leash her dog.

Over 100 birders joined the five Auk sessions, calling to support pro-environment candidates in swing states. The guest speakers provided a shot of avian inspiration, and participants discovered that calling strangers was not as scary as they'd feared. Many returned for multiple sessions.

"I was really nervous about doing it," said Cremin. "But like public speaking, you get over those fears. When I called Democratic voters in Iowa, people were generally receptive, and it was nice to connect back to the Midwest."

Chris Cooper said he was delighted to support the Auk phone-banking session, and called Auk's electoral work "long overdue."

"If we don't have elected officials who are receptive," he said, "we are crippled on climate change, preserving habitat, safeguarding environmental protections, and the Endangered Species Act...everything that matters! Which is why Auk must not

be just a 2020 one-shot. Let's make politicians reckon with birders as a voting bloc all the time, the way they currently listen to industry lobbyists."

Ultimately, we need long-established birding groups like National Audubon to start doing electoral work on behalf of birds and the environment. (Other nonprofit groups like Sierra Club do this by setting up a sister organization that can legally do partisan work such as endorsing candidates.) For now, Auk is there to fill the gap. Already, the young organization is involved in its second campaign "season."

Georgia's two Senate races led to a runoff election on January 5th that determined control of the U.S. Senate (with Democrats now the victors). Auk immediately jumped into organizing December phone banks to Georgia, including a partnership with Georgia Audubon chapters.

"I hope we'll be involved in the 2022 midterm elections, too," said Robinson. "They'll be tremendously important for birds and the environment!" *Want to help Auk The Vote grow and reach more birders in the 2022 midterms? Sign up at aukthevote.org or email aukthevote@gmail.com.*



Red-shouldered Hawk.

LEARNING FROM THE FEMINIST BIRD CLUB

BY MELISSA RAMOS

This new year, I am reflecting on how my words and actions can help build a more inclusive and equitable birding society. I look to several successful examples of equitable birding groups across the country for inspiration and hope. Perhaps the best example of how to promote diversity in birding comes from the Feminist Bird Club.

The Feminist Bird Club was founded in New York City in 2016 by Molly Adams. The group's primary mission is to provide safety and inclusivity in birding for all people. Since 2016 (and with tremendous grassroots organizing efforts), FBC has expanded into several chapters across the country and the world, including a chapter in San Francisco. Alex Smolyanskaya, a former GGAS board member, was one of the founders of the San Francisco FBC. Alex says her experience in GGAS's Master Birder class helped her take the next step in her birding career. She began leading bird walks and eventually co-founded the SF FBC chapter with fellow Master Birders Whitney Grover (GGAS board member), Nina Bai, and Sarah Burton.

"By co-founding this FBC chapter, we helped create space where all people would be comfortable birding," said Alex.

I learned a lot about equitable organizing from the Feminist Bird Club's successes. Our flock at GGAS can learn a lot from FBC too. Below are some tips and suggestions inspired by FBC that GGAS can easily fold into our current community. Everyone can feel empowered to do some (or all) of these eight simple actions to help promote more diverse and equitable birding spaces. I know I will!

1. Establish rules of engagement for safe and respectful conduct on walks and online.
2. Use birding as a tool to provide a peaceful and meditative birding experience for everyone.
3. Encourage people to bird as they're most comfortable, even if that looks different from our preferences.
4. Express solidarity for marginalized peoples in ways that are not tokenizing or burdensome. An example of this looks like speaking out against harmful comments or stereotypes.



Sandhills at Dawn

Rick Lewis

5. Allow room on bird walks for birders of all different levels of experience to join.
6. Always encourage new communities to join walks, such as parents with children or Black folks who tend not to attend bird walks.
7. Be gentle to new birders who may not know bird names yet or have access to birding books or classes.
8. Offer free resources (like showing folks how to use eBird or offering welcomed birding advice) to new birders to help them feel comfortable birding.

What does the future hold? Alex says, "We have accomplished a lot but there is still work to do with inviting new communities to FBC. I don't want to say that we are done with our work." We can learn so much from FBC's tenacity and untiring mission to make sure that our birding communities continue to grow and welcome all people to experience the joy of birds.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Volunteer Appreciation Celebration

Save the date for GGAS's first ever online Volunteer Appreciation Celebration! Our virtual celebration, complete with special awards and speeches, will take place on Thursday, January 28th at 7 pm. Be sure to check our website for more information.

Birdathon

Please stay tuned for updates on our 2021 Birdathon events! We are brainstorming new ways of conducting Birdathon during Covid-19 restrictions. We think you'll enjoy some of our creative ideas and fun events. Check out our website in February and March for more details.

Executive Director Search

A committee of GGAS Board and staff have been conducting an Executive Director search since early fall 2020. We look forward to announcing a new Executive Director in 2021 and we thank our current interim ED, Pam Young, for her service!



Bald Eagle.

Pen Waggener

NET NEGATIVE EMISSIONS IN CALIFORNIA BY 2030: CAN WE DO IT?

ELLIE COHEN

The latest climate science supports that the impacts of climate change are hitting hard and fast, posing grave threats to human and planetary health. We are already pushing against global tipping points that could unleash abrupt and irreversible damage to people and wildlife. Our only hope for an equitable future is to enact climate policies now. Ms. Cohen's talk hopes to inspire citizen action to ensure California steps up its climate leadership to protect people and the planet.

Ellie Cohen, CEO of The Climate Center, is a leader in catalyzing cross-boundary, collaborative and just solutions to climate change and environmental degradation. She has received numerous honors and was named one of "100 Women Taking the Lead to Save Our Planet" in the US by the National Women's History Project (2009).

GGAS's monthly Speaker Series is now online!

To sign up for email alerts with more info, email our Communications Manager, Melissa, at mramos@goldengateaudubon.org

ONLINE

Thursday, January 21
7 p.m. program
Zoom

A RAINFOREST AT OUR FEET: LOCAL WETLAND RESTORATION IN THE SF BAY AREA

JOHN ZENTNER

In this talk, acclaimed plant ecologist John Zentner will discuss how wetland health impacts the health of birds and wildlife. John will guide participants through understanding different types of local wetlands and will outline methods of wetland conservation and how these projects are crucial to maintaining holistic and healthy ecosystems that sustain all life.

John is a plant ecologist specializing in landscape restoration. He has an undergraduate degree from UC Santa Barbara, and graduate degrees and certifications from the University of Oregon and the University of Oslo. John is the wetland specialist for the California Coastal Commission and has held many other prestigious positions.



Great Blue Heron.

Stan Lupo

WHAT WOULD US CLIMATE POLICY LOOK LIKE IF PEOPLE AND PLANET MATTERED?

BASAV SEN

Please note: This talk begins at 6 pm PST. Basav Sen will discuss what a progressive internationalist agenda for US climate policy must look like for the US to truly become a good-faith partner to the rest of the world in addressing the climate crisis. He will examine various aspects of how the US engages with the rest of the world on climate to demonstrate how US policy has always been at odds with true global cooperation and solidarity, and to propose what a truly internationalist climate policy might look like.

Basav Sen joined the Institute for Policy Studies as the Climate Justice Project Director in February 2017. His work focuses on climate solutions at the national, state, and local level that address racial, economic, gender and other forms of inequality. He is currently the Climate Policy Director at the Institute for Policy Studies.



Great Horned Owl.

Mick Thompson

ONLINE

Thursday, February 18
7 p.m. program
Zoom

ONLINE

Thursday, March 18
6 p.m. program
Zoom

Thank you for joining our donor community.

Donations from September 1, 2020 through December 31, 2020.

With gratitude to every individual, business, and organization who made a recent donation. We are especially appreciative of all donations during the Coronavirus pandemic. Despite the impact to our in-person events, your donations and support have kept us going. Large or small, the gifts you send support our conservation, education, and member programs, and directly benefit the birds you love.

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Genetech (Barrie Simpson)
Google (Jessica Turner)
Morrisson & Foerster Foundation (Douglas Hendricks)

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East Bay Community Foundation (Buehler Fund)
Flora Family Foundation
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Deanna Burke, in honor of Dave Sharp’s 90th birthday.
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Golden Gate Audubon Society engages people to experience the wonder of birds and to translate that wonder into actions which protect native bird populations and their habitats.

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The Golden Gate Audubon Society was founded January 25, 1917. Golden Gate Audubon Supporting Membership is \$35 per year. You can join or renew on the website or through our Berkeley office.

The Gull is published four times per year. Special third-class postage paid in Oakland, CA. Send address changes to the office promptly. The post office does not forward *The Gull*.

Learn about upcoming Golden Gate Audubon events every month! Send your name and email address to mramos@goldengateaudubon.org to receive our monthly e-newsletters.

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This issue of *The Gull* was published January 2021.

www.goldengateaudubon.org

 The Gull is printed with soy-based inks on chlorine-free paper, 30% postconsumer waste content.

2 Habitat, or the Art of Birding During A Pandemic

Words of encouragement from our Executive Director during difficult times.

4 Learning from the Feminist Bird Club

The Feminist Bird Club teaches us many ways invite diverse communities to birding here at GGAS.

5 Speaker Series

Don't miss these presentations on net negative emissions in California, local wetland restoration, and climate policy.

BACKYARD BIRDER



Bob Lewis

Oak Titmouse.

THE OAK TITMOUSE

BY GAIL KURTZ

Field guides often describe Oak Titmice as drab, nondescript, and “plain as a bird can be.” But I light up every time I see one, with its downy breast, taupe-colored body, and intense black eyes. Its tufted gray crest makes it appear cheerful and game for anything, like a little gray Robin Hood.

The first time I spied an Oak Titmouse it was practically bounding along the branch of my neighbor's pistachio tree, gleaming eyes focused on the feeder below. It eventually dove down and disap-

peared, but the intensity of that gaze stayed with me. As members of the tit family, Oak Titmice are some of the most intelligent birds, after corvids (crows and jays) and parrots, and it shows in their eyes.

Although Oak Titmice are year-round residents, they seem to come and go from the yards around my home. I'm always delighted when I hear their tsicka-dee-dee calls, high whistles, or emphatic buzzing as they protect their territory. They're forever bustling, whether flitting through the pistachio tree or zooming to nearby redwoods. When they finally stop to perch on the fence, their upright crests make them look like tiny soldiers on a mission.

I watch pairs rustle through the trees (Oak Titmice mate for life), often hanging upside down to forage. Sometimes one will sit like a sentry, its dark eyes alert while its mate searches for insects. They're known to catch bugs in mid-air. They also feed on spiders, berries, and seeds, and will happily visit birdfeeders.

Known as “the voice and soul of the oaks,” Oak Titmice prefer to nest in the cavities of oaks but will settle for holes in other trees, will roost in clusters of leaves or pine needles, and even inhabit birdhouses. I wonder if they've taken up residence in my neighbor's redwoods, but I'm not sure.

I relish these energetic birds. I worry about them too. Although Oak Titmice are abundant in parts of their range (which runs from Southern Oregon through California to Baja), the population is declining due to habitat displacement and Sudden Oak Disease. I've decided to offer the Oak Titmice in my neighborhood a home. I've ordered a birdhouse and a suet feeder. Hopefully soon they'll settle in, and I can continue enjoying these anything-but-drab birds.